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ABSTRACT

The importance of assessing language proficiency levels and the relationship of this priority to the teaching of Russian at the university level are discussed. Serious concerns about the value of language-specific proficiency guidelines are raised, and an argument is presented suggesting that language-specific guidelines may lead to undue emphasis on discrete-point testing. It is stressed that the importance of the proficiency testing program is not so much the test itself as the effect the program could and should have on the curriculum, and on what kind of information is being taught and how this information is taught. Reference is made to the poor performance of the most recent group of Russian language students evaluated by one tester to make the point that a firm foundation of language and structure should be laid before students become too fluent. Accuracy must be inculcated from the very beginning. The importance of teaching proper intonation is stressed, and attention is given to the Hypothetical Model of Relative Contributions (Higgs and Clifford) as an aid to curriculum design. (DJD)

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Assessing Language Proficiency Levels:
Oral Proficiency Testing, Pre- and Post-Soviet Study

AATSEEL, Washington DC, December 29, 1988
Robert L. Baker

I am, as usual, probably preaching to the converted. Your very presence here indicates that you probably do not need to be convinced concerning the desirability of assessing language proficiency levels. But that has never kept me from talking in the past!

Where I'm Coming From

I feel it important to state briefly "where" I'm coming from, because I plan to say some things which will sound very critical if not heretical, and I want it to be clearly understood that what I am saying is coming not from the enemy lines but from a believer.

The tendency of language teachers to go to extremes, and perhaps Russian teachers are less flexible than in other languages in this respect. The ultimate concern should be the need to find the golden mean, but that of course is the most difficult thing, perhaps, again, more for Russian teachers, who tend as a profession to be more traditional (dare I say "hide-bound") than most.

I have been teaching for proficiency for 41 years, but I never called it that. If pressed to give it a name, I suppose I would have called it teaching for mastery or active control. My methods have always been, and still are, highly eclectic, and would not be approved by some of the more zealous followers of the new proficiency movement. But I **have gotten results**. It is also important to remember that the teaching for proficiency movement is not a methodology but an approach or a professional philosophy.

I was among the first group of Russian teachers trained for testing in the non-governmental academic sphere (one of only two, I believe, of that small group to have completed certification requirements). Although firmly convinced of the value of the testing movement, I still have some reservations about it, and feel that the tester's handbook and the guidelines still need some serious reworking. In general, I have found the language-specific guidelines to be less useful than the generic descriptions of linguistic behavior at various levels. Not only do I find the language-specific guidelines to be difficult to use, I feel that there may be just criticism that they lead to an undue emphasis on discrete-point testing.

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Assessing Proficiency
AATSEEL, December 1988

I have tested probably more individuals than anyone in a Russian academic setting other than Irene Thompson. In fact, I just returned from a session in Leningrad doing the post-test interviews on the CIEE (Council on International Educational Exchange) semester-length program students currently there.

I think that it is unrealistic, at least in the case of Russian, to think that we will see the day when there will be enough certified testers to do as much testing as is desirable. The few testers who have been certified are already overburdened.

I see the importance of the testing program not so much in the test itself as in the effect it could and should have on the curriculum, on what we teach and the way in which we teach it. I continue to have the impression that most Russian teachers are so firmly entrenched in the grammar-translation camp that they don't even realize there is an alternative. Most can think in no broader terms than discrete-point testing, and most need a course in when and how to correct student errors.

But I also have a growing impression that an ever-increasing number of our tribe has embraced the proficiency movement in an overly narrow and unquestioning manner. It appears that many teachers are using what I call the "babble method," with emphasis on vocabulary learning and with structure thrown out of the window. Too often, apparently, meaning becomes the focal point, while form becomes secondary.

This impression is based on years of receiving freshmen who have studied previously, transfer students, or students in the intensive programs of the Indiana Summer Slavic Workshop and of the Russian School at Middlebury. Most recently this impression has been reinforced by my experience administering the oral proficiency interview five times in the last fifteen months for CIEE.

I have, frankly, been shocked by the low level of a number of students being sent to Leningrad, some of whom are at the Novice Level. Theoretically, this means that they should not be able to cope in the foreign setting, even at a survival level.

Even more shocking, I have tested a number of individuals whom I would judge to be terminal cases, not expected to make any progress in the Soviet Union because they are already too glib to understand the need for improving

their grammatical accuracy. They know a lot of words, but cannot control the structure and the prognosis for their ever doing so is very dim. This is something I have been "yammering" at the profession about for 30 years, with little success. I find it very sad that there is still so little professional understanding of the importance of laying a foundation of firm structure before allowing students to become too fluent or before letting them get in over their heads trying to do actively what they do not have the means to do (after all, the main import of Krashen's work concerns **input**, not output).

Among the most recent group of students I tested were:

A Novice High student who had been studying for three years.
A terminal Intermediate student who has been studying for three years.
A student who has studied three years plus two years at a much-publicized summer program who is Intermediate High, probably terminal.
Three graduate students (one at an Ivy League University, another at one of the best state universities) who are terminal Intermediate High.
A candidate for the M.A. in Oral Interpretation who is terminal Intermediate high — he cannot narrate satisfactorily in the future tense! He realize the need to improve his Russian, but his method of accomplishing this will be to work on a Soviet trawler off the Pacific coast — a highly unlikely setting for improving his lacking skills.

I accuse the graduate schools and those institutions sending students overseas (including my own institution) of insufficient testing and screening to ascertain whether the individuals being chosen for study are, in fact, apt to benefit from the unique training opportunities being provided them. I further accuse most Russian graduate schools of not caring about the proficiency of their students — in fact there have been many cases of graduate students who finish their degree program with lower proficiency levels than when they entered the program.

The Importance of Accuracy

I reaffirm what I have been saying for 40 years: Accuracy must be inculcated from the very beginning. I still have extreme difficulty with the idea of gradual approximations, particularly in matters such as pronunciation and intonation.

The higher one goes on the proficiency scale, the more important accuracy is. At lower levels the important thing is the ability to communicate. At the

higher levels accuracy of communication becomes increasingly important. But I insist that stress on accuracy must begin at the very beginning, before a student is allowed to become facile and fluent, and no longer feels a need for correctness of expression.

I would like to quote here from Galal Walker, a teacher of Chinese, in a manuscript prepared for the *Northeast Conference Reports* for 1989:[1]

> ... pronunciation need only be intelligible to achieve one's intention in a discrete task that will not be repeated with the same person, but it has to be acceptable in a way that does not evoke negative emotions if one is to create the willingness to maintain contact with a person who is not obligated to do so. From pronunciation to speech acts ... accuracy plays a critical role in successfully functioning linguistically. Accurate production comes after one has learned to perceive accurate models and experienced repeated accurate (hence, guided) performances. Accuracy takes time to inculcate, especially in languages which differ greatly from the base language of the learner.

The Role of Intonation

Although there has been a considerable improvement in recent years in the matter of teaching intonation, I am still sometimes startled by the fact that some of my recent testees have not been properly trained to respond to Russian intonation. Apparently there are still too many teachers who think that correct intonation is something that can be taken care of at the advanced level, if the student ever gets there and if there is time for it. There have been a number of occasions in which a student failed to respond at all to an IK-3 question (a question without a question word, signalled by intonation alone), apparently not recognizing it as a question. In this respect, I want to call your attention to an article by Dorothy M. Chun in the latest issue of *The Modern Language Journal*, "The Neglected Role of Intonation in Communicative

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[1] Walker, Galal. "The Less Commonly Taught Languages, " in *Northeast Conference Reports*, 1989. [unpublished manuscript at the time]

Competence and Proficiency,"[2] in which the author stresses the importance of intonation as a discourse device beyond the sentence level.

> ... both the theorists and particularly the applied linguists have largely overlooked *intonation* when describing the functions of natural language, i.e., what is actually *done* by language rather than what is *said*, and in turn, language learners are not taught how to use intonation to signal discourse strategies.
>
> Intonation is fundamental to genuine communication because communicative competence is the ability not only to formulate grammatically correct utterances, but also to signal interactional strategies, such as interrupting, asking for clarification, taking the floor, changing the subject, concluding an argument, or constraining a hearer to reply. (295)
>
> ... factors, such as what is appropriate in a particular social situation and the effect of the utterance on the interlocutor, must also be taken into account. (295)
>
> ... competence should also include the ability to signal, for example, whether an utterance is intended to invoke a response or whether it is intended to mark a boundary in discourse. (299)
>
> Until recently, intonation was not considered a critical component of language learning, as it was thought to contribute little, if anything, to the production of correct forms or sentences. Moreover, since in many cases, intonation is redundant to the syntax or to the surface semantic meaning of an utterance, it was considered at best "icing on the cake." The minor role thus attributed to intonation was based on the faulty assumption that mastery of the syntactic structures automatically insures that a sentence will be understood as a statement or a question, and that properly chosen lexical items will adequately signal a particular attitude. However, as modern linguistic research has shown, the redundancy argument is seriously flawed, first, because intonation can be shown to provide meaning not coded in any other form, and second, because the language learner needs not only to make her/himself understood but also to understand intonational contrasts made by native speakers. (301)

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[2] Chun, Dorothy M. "The Neglected Role of Intonation in Communicative Competence and Proficiency," *Modern Language Journal* 72:III (1988), 295-303.

Higgs and Clifford

I would now like to turn to what I consider to be a seminal article, of more importance than it has been granted, at least in recent years. (When I was in tester training it was given to us in xeroxed form, but it appears this is no longer being done.) The article, by Theodore V. Higgs and Ray Clifford. "The Push Toward Communication," appeared in the 1982 volume of the ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series[3]

The article may be somewhat old now (in fact, some of the criticisms of testing seem have been implemented by now), but it is still very meaningful. It should be read by all teachers, particularly those interested in teaching for proficiency.

> ... the fact that function, content, and accuracy are interrelated mandates that no judgment of general language proficiency or "communicative competence" be made without considering all three. (60)

> ... the widespread impression that communicative competence is a term for communication *in spite of* language, rather than communication *through* language. As a result, the role of grammatical precision has been downplayed, particularly by some who carry the banner of communicative competence. (60-61)

> ...recent analyses of students [in governmental schools] who have not met performance standards have led to the discovery of a phenomenon referred to as "the terminal 2." This rating is associated with students who enter training with a Level 2 proficiency but peat out at Level 2+. They do not progress to Level 3, and thus never attain the linguistic skills needed to read minimum job proficiency standards. (65) .... This pattern of high vocabulary and low grammar is a classic profile for a terminal 2/2+.

> In fact, the terminal profile ... is encountered all to frequently in government screening programs. It is important to note that the grammar weaknesses that are typically found in this profile are not *missing* gram-

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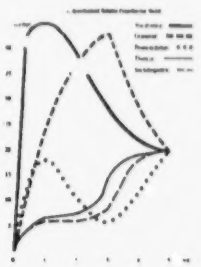
[3] Higgs, Theodore V. and Ray Clifford. "The Push Toward Communication," in Theodore V. Higgs (ed.). *Curriculum, Competence, and the Foreign Language Teacher*. The ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series. Skokie IL: National Textbook Company, 1982, 57-79.

matical patterns, which the student could learn or acquire later on, but are *fossilized* incorrect patterns. Experience has shown again and again that such fossilized patterns are not remediable, even in intensive language training programs or additional in-country living experience.

A terminal profile has also been identified at the 1+ level. The terminal 1+ has usually learned the foreign language on the streets. Street learners do not need accurate grammar to survive. As a result, they develop and internalize their own communications strategies. Even though most of these strategies are not linguistically correct, they succeed for Level 1 tasks. They do not, however, work at higher functional levels, when more sophisticated communicative tasks are attempted. This means that these inaccurate strategies, which normally consist of fossilized lexical and grammatical structures, have to be *unlearned* before functional language ability can be improved. Once again, remediation in these cases is seldom, if ever successful. (67)

The application of this hypothesized model of oral proficiency [the Hypothetical Model of Relative Contributions] to curriculum design is quite straightforward. If the goal of the curriculum is to produce Level 3 speakers of a language, then the concentration on language subskills in the curriculum should be representative of their relative importance in performing Level 3 tasks. Grammar skills would be an important part of the curriculum. If the goal is to produce students with Level 1 survival skills, then the optimum curriculum mix would be entirely different, with a primary emphasis on the teaching and practice of vocabulary.



The ultimate goal of instruction is thus the deciding factor in establishing the factor mix for a particular curriculum. The key word is *ultimate*. While the most efficient way to achieve survival level proficiency would

be a course that stressed vocabulary, our experience indicates that such a course would work to the disadvantage of students who wished to develop higher levels of proficiency. Students entering such a program would have to be warned of its potentially negative effect on their long-range aspirations. (73)

Data presented elsewhere in the literature show that in programs that have as curricular goals an early emphasis on unstructured communicative activities — minimizing, or excluding entirely, considerations of grammatical accuracy — it is possible in a fairly short time, say, not later than the fourth semester, to provide students with a relatively large vocabulary and a high degree of fluency, as measured by the delivery rate in words per minute. Moreover, these skills can indeed be used successfully by students, in combination with certain auto-generated communication strategies such as pidginization, elaborate mime, and gesture to realize a measure of authentic communication. Since "communication" is the *sine qua non* of language study, it would be difficult to quarrel with approaches that promise these kinds of results, if only the same approaches did not also carry such undesirable side effects. For these same data suggest that the premature immersion of a student into an unstructured or "free" conversational setting before certain fundamental linguistic structures are more or less in place is not done without cost. There appears to be a real danger of leading the students too rapidly into the "creative aspects of language use," in that if successful communication is encouraged and rewarded for its own sake, the effect seems to be one of rewarding at the same time the *incorrect* communication strategies seized upon in attempting to deal with the communication situations presented. When these reinforced communication strategies fossilize prematurely, their subsequent modification or ultimate correction is rendered difficult to the point of impossibility, irrespective of the native talent or high motivation that the individual may originally have brought to the task. Experience shows that even if students "learn" (as distinct from "acquire") grammar rules later on, they find themselves quite unable to do what they know. (73-74)

What about programs that from the early stages place a higher premium on linguistic or grammatical accuracy? Our preliminary interpretation of the data shows that at a corresponding point in the learning process, that is, after four semesters of instruction, although the vocabulary and fluency profiles are relatively lower then in the preceding case, the accuracy profile is much higher. Thus, although the performance levels for the three components — vocabulary, grammar, and fluency — are different between

the two groups, the overall (i.e., global) ratings are comparable. The important difference between the competing profiles is the prognosis for each. (74)

[Terminal 2+ syndrome] Grammatical precision seems largely unaffected, not only by additional classroom time but even by further in-country experience....

Members of the group that have arrived at the 2/2+ level through "accuracy first" programs, however, typically show the opposite prognosis. The expectation is that these individuals will continue to build on the skills they already possess, and will later on learn or acquire additional skills necessary to progress upward beyond the 2/2+ level. (74)

It sounds reasonable to argue that "since we're going to have the students for only a limited time, and since they're not likely to become genuinely fluent speakers of the target language as a result of our program alone, then it's better to provide them with what they'll be happy with, with what they can probably handle with relative ease, and with what our staff can reasonably to deliver in the time available." Yet, what sounds so reasonable may in fact condemn the student-client to a proficiency level far below the one to which he or she aspires.

When we recognize that the typically university-level foreign-language major graduates mostly 2s or 2+s, then the program-terminal level of student performance is not at issue, for students can reach this level by either route. What is at issue is whether we opt for a program that produces a terminal 2/2+ or for one that produces a 2/2+ capable of going on under different circumstances — intensive instruction, foreign study or residence — to become a 3, a 4, or, in rare cases, even a 5. Viewed in this light, matters of public relations or short-term effect on student motivation take on a different cast, and the complementary notion of professional ethics moves into the foreground. (75)

The issues we have addressed are substantive, although what is at stake is less an either/or proposition than a matter of priorities. A curricular or programmatic decision to strive for linguistic accuracy form the beginning of a program in no way excludes an approach or methodology in which the target language is used as the medium of instruction and for authentic, if relatively more constrained, communication. No reasoned interpretation of the date data suggests a return to grammar-translation or classical mim-

> mem audio-lingual methodologies. What is implied is the systematic recognition of the *ultimate* role that linguistic accuracy plays in the achievement of true communicative competence, in which it truly does matter *how* the message is transmitted. (77)

Since the Higgs and Clifford article appeared in 1982, it might be considered out-of-date now. I have, however, seen no convincing evidence that its fundamental premises are wrong.

It would be wrong, however, to leave you with the impression that the oral proficiency movement is of one mind, or that it is without opponents from outside. Although one of the aims of the movement has been to get away from discrete-point grammar testing, there has been much criticism that it, in fact has played into the hands of the traditionalists for whom discrete-point testing is the highest good. I recommend to your attention an article in the most recent issue of *The Modern Language Journal*, "Grammar and the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview: Discussion and Data, by Sally Magnan.[4] This article is based on a study of a limited number of French students. The author summarizes arguments that the interview "shows a dangerous preoccupation with grammatical correctness not supported by current research in second language acquisition." (266) She also quotes sources indicating that the interview is a balanced instrument covering a number of different factors. Although Magnan states:

> Grammar can also be viewed from the broader perspective of appropriateness, including sensitivity to supra-segmental or communicative factors that respond to sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and discourse constraints. (266)

In her own study, for practical reasons, Magnan employed a very narrow definition of grammar, "limited to the usage of either particular morphological or syntactic features, " (269) and a very limited number of error types at that. Although she found a high correlation between number of errors and proficiency rating given, she concludes:

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[4] Magnan, Sally Sieloff. "Grammar and the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview: Discussion and Data,"*Modern Language Journal* 72:III (1988), 266-276.

> Given the substantial overlap among the bands of percentage of error across proficiency levels, there seems to be little evidence in these data that the OPI places extreme emphasis on any particular grammatical category. (273)

Finally, I would like to quote from an article by Del Phillips in the December issue of the *AATSEEL Newsletter*[5]:

> There should be concern for the development of linguistic accuracy from the beginning of instruction. Students must know that they are ultimately responsible for their own grammatical improvement. This should come as a relief to the more traditionally oriented instructor who fears the total ACTFL of grammar within the proficiency orientation. Error corrections is one of the most controversial aspects of language teaching today. There are some methodologists who claim that correction simply does not help, and that we should throw away our red pens altogether! Others assert that no mistake should be allowed to slip by uncorrected. It seems to me that a more moderate view is that mistakes should be handled as a natural part of the learning process. On the beginning level of instruction many grammatical mistakes are to be expected, and harsh emphasis upon correction should probably be avoided. (10)

Unfortunately, for the teacher who wishes to teach for proficiency or communicative competence, there are no suitable textbooks (even mine, the most communicatively oriented of recent textbooks falls far short of what is needed, for reasons which could take up a whole paper). Until a suitable textbook is available, we will have to rely on teachers to supplement and adapt what is available. But I would warn against doing so in such a way that stress is put on vocabulary acquisition at the expense of firm structural control. For now, I really believe very firmly that the best course is take such a textbook as *Russian for Everybody* and take every opportunity to turn exercises into communicative tasks without at the same time ignoring grammar or adding to the students burden with long lists of additional words. (In other words, those acquainted with the oral interview procedure should avoid teaching specifically for the test.) At least the student will have a firm basis from which to shove off to the higher proficiency levels.

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[5] Phillips, Del. "The Proficiency-Oriented Classroom: Some Pedagogical Considerations," in *AATSEEL Newsletter*, December 1988, 10.

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Yes, teach authentic language using authentic materials, teach communicative strategies. But **structure** must underlie all of this. And we must all apply more professional honesty toward our students as to their potential and in writing recommendations and evaluations of our students when they apply to graduate schools or for overseas programs.

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